

FRANK BRUNI

## Our Crazy College Crossroads

Over recent days the notices have gone out, an annual ritual of dashed hopes.

Brown University offered admission to the lowest fraction ever of the applicants it received: fewer than one in 10. The arithmetic was even more brutal at Stanford, Columbia, Yale. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had a record number of students vying for its next freshman class — 31,321 — and accepted about one in six who applied from outside the state. Notre Dame took about one in five of all comers.

And right now many young men and women who didn't get in where they fervently longed to are worrying that it's some grim harbinger of their future, some sweeping judgment of their worth.

This is for them. And it's intended less as a balm for the rejected than as a reality check for a society gone nuts over the whole overheated process.

If you were shut out of an elite school, that doesn't mean you're less gifted than all of the students who were welcomed there. It may mean only that you lacked the patronage that some of them had, or that you played the game less single-mindedly, taking fewer SAT courses and failing to massage your biography with the same zeal.

A friend of mine in Africa told me recently about a center for orphans there that a rich American couple financed in part to give their own teenage children an exotic charity to visit occasionally and mine for college-application essays: admissions bait. That's the degree of cunning that comes into this frenzy.

Maybe the school that turned you down ranks high in the excessively publicized "College Salary Report" by PayScale.com, which looks at whose graduates go on to make the most money.

What a ludicrous list. It's at least as imperfectly assembled as the honor roll that U.S. News & World Report puts together every year. And even if you trust it, what does it tell you? That the colleges at the top have the most clout and impart the best skills? Or that these colleges admit the most young people whose parents and previously established networks guarantee them a leg up?

Maybe it tells you merely that these colleges attract the budding plutocrats

### Accepted? Rejected? Neither seals your fate.

with the greatest concern for the heft of their paychecks. Is that the milieu you sought?

About money and professional advancement: Shiny diplomas from shiny schools help. It's a lie to say otherwise. But it's as foolish to accord their luster more consequence than the effort you put into your studies, the earnestness with which you hone your skills, what you actually learn. These are the sturdier building blocks of a career.

In "David and Goliath," Malcolm Gladwell makes the case that a less exclusive university may enable a student to stand out and flourish in a way that a more exclusive one doesn't. The selectiveness of Gladwell's science doesn't nullify the plausibility of his argument.

Corner offices in this country team with C.E.O.s who didn't do their undergraduate work in the Ivy League. Marilynn Hewson of Lockheed Martin went to the University of Alabama. John Mackey of Whole Foods studied at the University of Texas, never finishing.

Your diploma is, or should be, the least of what defines you. Show me someone whose identity is rooted in where he or she went to college. I'll show you someone you really, really don't want at your Super Bowl party.

And your diploma will have infinitely less relevance to your fulfillment than so much else: the wisdom with which you choose your romantic partners; your interactions with the community you inhabit; your generosity toward the family that you inherited or the family that you've made.

If you're not bound for the school of your dreams, you're probably bound for a school that doesn't conform as tidily to your fantasies or promise to be as instantly snug a fit.

Good. College should be a crucible. It's about departure, not continuity: about turning a page and becoming a new person, not letting the ink dry on who, at 17 or 18, you already are. The disruption of your best-laid plans serves that. It's less a setback than a springboard.

A high school senior I know didn't get into several of the colleges she coveted most. She got into a few that are plenty excellent. And I've never been more impressed with her, because she quickly realized that her regrets pale beside her blessings and she pivoted from letdown to excitement.

That resiliency and talent for optimism will matter more down the line than the name of the school lucky enough to have her. Like those of her peers who are gracefully getting past this ordeal that our status-mad society has foisted on them, she'll do just fine. □



## The Things She Carried

By Cara Hoffman

**T**HE injury wasn't new, and neither was the insult. Rebecca, a combat veteran of two tours of duty, had been waiting at the V.A. hospital for close to an hour when the office manager asked if she was there to pick up her husband.

No, she said, fighting back her exasperation. She was there because of a spinal injury she sustained while fighting in Afghanistan.

Women have served in the American military in some capacity for 400 years. They've deployed alongside men as soldiers in three wars, and since the 1990s, a significant number of them are training, fighting and returning from combat.

But stories about female veterans are nearly absent from our culture. It's not that their stories are poorly told. It's that their stories are simply not told in our literature, film and popular culture.

Women have the same issues as men upon return, from traumatic physical injuries to post-traumatic stress disorder. One young combat veteran told me a harrowing story of crushing a little boy beneath the wheels of her speeding

*Cara Hoffman is the author of the novel "Be Safe I Love You," about a female veteran.*

Humvee. I am sure she hears the sound of that vehicle hitting his small body every day of her life.

In addition, as many as a third of all women serving in the military are raped by fellow soldiers during their tours of duty, compounding whatever traumas they may have experienced in combat.

And yet Rebecca's experience at the V.A. hospital is common. I've talked with many women veterans, and like all soldiers, they've recounted the fire-fights, moral confusion and compassion for those whose lives are torn apart by war.

Each had a different experience, and each bore her pains differently. But there was this simple, common thread: their stories of being unrecognized at home, which always carried with it a separate kind of frustration and incredulity.

Male soldiers' experiences make up the foundation of art and literature: From "The Odyssey" to "The Things They Carried," the heroic or tragic protagonist's face is familiar, timeless and, without exception, male. The story of men in combat is taught globally, examined broadly, celebrated and vilified in fiction, exploited by either side of the aisle in politics.

For women it's a different story, one in which they are more often cast as victims, wives, nurses; anything but soldiers who see battle. In the rare war

JOE NOCERA

## A Step Toward Justice in College Sports?

If you were going to hold up a school as being exemplary in the way it puts athletics in, as they say, "the proper perspective," Northwestern University would certainly be one you'd point to. For instance, although it lacks the kind of winning tradition — at least in the big-time sports — that other schools in the Big Ten can boast of, it proudly points to the 97 percent graduation rate of its athletes.

Yet buried in last week's decision by Peter Sung Ohr, the regional director of the National Labor Relations Board — in which he said that the Northwestern football team had the right to form a union — was this anecdote about Kain Colter, the former Northwestern quarterback who is leading the union effort. In his sophomore year, dreaming of going to medical school someday, Colter "attempted to take a required chemistry course." However, "his coaches and advisors discouraged him from taking the course because it conflicted with morning football practices." Eventually, after falling behind other pre-med students, he wound up switching his major to psychology, "which he believed to be less demanding," according to Ohr.

Ohr's essential point was that unlike the rest of the student body at Northwestern, football players had little control over their lives. Their schedules were dictated by the needs of the football team. They had bosses in the form of coaches and other university officials who could fire them. They had to abide by a million petty N.C.A.A. rules, and they lacked many of the freedoms and rights taken for granted by students who didn't play sports. They put in up to 50-hours a week at their sport — vastly more than is supposedly allowed under N.C.A.A. rules. But then, every school finds ways to evade those rules, whether they have athletics "in perspective" or not.

Anyone who cares about justice had to be encouraged by Ohr's ruling. In outlining the many ways that North-

western's football players were primarily employees of the university, recruited to the campus to generate revenue, Ohr ignored the idyllic myth of the "student-athlete" and dealt in cold, hard facts. ("Student-athlete," it's worth remembering, is a phrase invented by the N.C.A.A. in the 1950s precisely to avoid having to grant workers' compensation to injured college football players on the grounds that they fit the classic definition of employees.)

Having said that, it seems to me that both the fans and the critics of Ohr's decision have been getting a little ahead of themselves. It is only one team at one school, and while I hear reliably that

### A union could help. But several lawsuits could bring bigger changes.

other teams at other schools are investigating the possibility of forming a union, we are years away from knowing whether a union would necessarily mean players are eventually paid (as proponents hope) or that their scholarships will be taxed (as critics warn). Given the N.C.A.A.'s fierce resistance to anything that might dilute its power — or worse, give power to the athletes themselves — it is a certainty that Ohr's decision will wind up in a federal appeals court.

The buzz over the union effort has also had the effect, at least temporarily, of distracting attention from other efforts that have the potential to upend the system even more radically. One is a class-action lawsuit that has been active for several years now, the O'Bannon case, named for Ed O'Bannon, the former U.C.L.A. basketball star. Although ostensibly about the licensing and im-

narratives where women do appear, the focus is generally on military sexual assault, a terrible epidemic of violence that needs to be revealed and ended, but not something that represents the full experience of women in the military.

Homecoming isn't easy for anyone, but traditional domestic expectations can make it particularly challenging for women.

Feelings of wanting to be alone, of alienation, are more difficult, as women are expected to be patient nurturers who care for spouses and children. Parenting under the best circumstances can test a person's patience, but parenting after life under fire is more than most of us could take. Studies show women experience elevated anxiety about caring for their families upon

### Why does American literature ignore women in combat roles?

homecoming, including an increased fear that they may hurt their own children.

Lack of recognition is also a problem. I've stood next to my uniform-wearing brother, a veteran of two tours in Afghanistan, in a grocery store while three separate strangers approached to thank him for his service. Women veterans are rarely stopped by people who want to shake their hands. Even wearing fatigues and boots and carrying duffel bags standing in a bus station or at the airport, somehow they go unrecognized as returning warriors.

The sense of emptiness that can follow unacknowledged accomplishments and unacknowledged trauma makes women soldiers feel invisible and adds yet one more insult to injury. Depression, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and suicide do not just affect male soldiers, though theirs are the stories we see. Women who have served in the military are three times more likely to commit suicide than their civilian counterparts.

I can't help but think women soldiers would be afforded the respect they deserve if their experiences were reflected in literature, film and art, if people could see their struggles, their resilience, their grief represented.

They would be made visible if we could read stories that would allow us to understand that women kill in combat and lose friends and long to see their children and partners at home. They would be given appropriate human compassion if we could feel their experiences viscerally as we do when reading novels like "All Quiet on the Western Front," or seeing films like "The Hurt Locker."

Society may come to understand war differently if people could see it through the eyes of women who've experienced both giving birth and taking life. People might learn something new about aggression and violence if we read not just about those fighting the enemy but about those who must also fight off assault from the soldiers they serve beside or report to.

Female veterans' stories clearly have the power to change and enrich our understanding of war. But their unsung epics might also have the power to change our culture, our art, our nation and our lives. □

DAVID BROOKS

## The Employer's Creed

Dear Employers,

You may not realize it, but you have a powerful impact on the culture and the moral ecology of our era. If your human resources bosses decide they want to hire a certain sort of person, then young people begin turning themselves into that sort of person.

Therefore, I'm asking you to think about the following principles, this Employer's Creed. If you follow these principles in your hiring practices, you'll be sending a signal about what sort of person gets ahead. You may correct some of the perversities at the upper reaches of our meritocracy. You may even help cultivate deeper, fuller human beings.

*Bias hiring decisions against perfectionists.* If you work in a white-collar sector that attracts highly educated job applicants, you've probably been flooded with résumés from people who are not so much human beings as perfect avatars of success. They got 3.8 grade-point averages in high school and college. They served in the cliché leadership positions on campus. They got all the perfect consultant/investment bank internships. During off-hours they distributed bed nets in Zambia and dug wells in Peru.

When you read these résumés, you have two thoughts. First, this applicant is awesome. Second, there's something completely flavorless here. This person has followed the cookie-cutter formula for what it means to be successful and you actually have no clue what the person is really like except for a high talent for social conformity. Either they have no desire to chart out an original life course or lack the courage to do so. Shy away from such people.

*Bias hiring decisions toward dualists.* The people you want to hire should have achieved some measure of conventional success, but they should have also engaged in some desperate lark that made no sense from a career or social status perspective. Maybe a person left a successful banking job to rescue the family dry-cleaning business in Akron. Maybe another had great grades at a fancy

### Changing the culture one hire at a time.

East Coast prep school but went off to a Christian college because she wanted a place to explore her values. These people have done at least one Deeply Unfashionable Thing. Such people have intrinsic motivation, native curiosity and social courage.

*Bias toward truth-tellers.* I recently ran into a fellow who hires a lot of people. He said he asks the following question during each interview. "Could you describe a time when you told the truth and it hurt you?" If the interviewee can't immediately come up with an episode, there may be a problem here.

*Don't mindlessly favor people with high G.P.A.s.* Students who get straight As have an ability to prudentially master their passions so they can achieve proficiency across a range of subjects. But you probably want employees who are relentlessly dedicated to one subject. In school, those people often got As in subjects they were passionate about but got Bs in subjects that did not arouse their imagination.

*Reward the ripening virtues, not the blooming virtues.* Some virtues bloom forth with youth: being intelligent, energetic, curious and pleasant. Some virtues only ripen over time: other-centeredness, having a sense for how events will flow, being able to discern what's right in the absence of external affirmation. These virtues usually come with experience, after a person has taken time off to raise children, been fired or learned to cope with having a cruel boss. The blooming virtues are great if you are hiring thousands of consultants to churn out reports. For most other jobs, you want the ripening ones, too.

*Reward those who have come by way of sorrow.* Job seekers are told to present one linear narrative to the world, one that can easily be read and digested as a series of clean conquests. But if you are stuck in an airport bar with a colleague after a horrible business trip, would you really want to have a drink with a person like that? No, you'd want a real human being, someone who'd experienced setback, suffering and recovery. You'd want someone with obvious holes in his résumé, who has learned the lessons that only suffering teaches, and who got back on track.

*Reward cover letter rebels.* Job seeking is the second greatest arena of social pretense in modern life — after dating. But some people choose not to spin and exaggerate. They choose not to make each occasion seem more impressive than it really was. You want people who are radically straight, even with superiors.

You could argue that you don't actually want rich, full personalities for your company. You just want achievement drones who can perform specific tasks. I doubt that's in your company's long-term interests. But if you fear leaping out in this way, at least think of the effect you're having on the deeper sensibilities of the next generation, the kind of souls you are incentivizing and thus fashioning, the legacy you will leave behind. □

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